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SUBJECT: SMALL PROTESTS IN HAITI AUGUST 25

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Classified By: Amb. Janet A. Sanderson for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Small groups of rioters burned tires and erected barricades August 25 in Port au Prince and the southern town of Les Cayes. Most businesses in Les Cayes closed that day, but Port au Prince remained open for business. UN peacekeepers and the Haitian National Police responded quickly to remove roadblocks and restore order. These small disturbances followed a week of persistent rumors that widespread demonstrations and strikes were planned for the week beginning August 25. The rioters voiced no demands, but these small disturbances came as a confluence of factors -- including the prolonged absence of a confirmed government, continuing inflation, and rising school fees as the beginning of the school year nears -- have combined to create an environment of uncertainty. End summary.

PROTESTS IN PORT-AU-PRINCE, LES CAYES

¶2. (SBU) Protestors erected a number of barricades in Port-au-Prince the morning of August 25, according to Embassy contacts and press reports. The Haitian National Police (HNP) dismantled at least two such roadblocks in the Delmas area of the capital and stepped up its static and roving patrols to maintain order. HNP and MINUSTAH sources say that piles of rocks and tires were placed in strategic areas downtown the night of August 24, but that the police and MINUSTAH moved aggressively during the night to remove them. Rock-throwing incidents occurred in the Port au Prince district of Delmas. Other areas of the capital stayed quiet; an Embassy contractor driving through the wealthy suburb of Petionville, for instance, reported that businesses there were open, although foot and vehicle traffic there was unusually light. The often volatile slum of Cite Soleil remained quiet, although contractors working on USG-funded construction projects there halted work for the day. The Embassy's Narcotics Affairs Section released tear gas canisters from USG-controlled stocks to the HNP at the request of the HNP's Director General on August 24 as police readied themselves for potentially tense standoffs in the capital. (Note: The canisters are held under USG control pursuant to a Congressional mandate. End note.) However, we have heard no reports that the tear gas was used.

13. (SBU) Several UN and HNP sources reported that a "handful" of people had erected barricades and burned tires early in the morning on August 25 in Les Cayes, where the April riots began. Increased MINUSTAH patrols had largely restored order there, but many stores there were closed. State Secretary for Public Security Luc Joseph Eucher denied press reports that tear gas had been used to disperse a crowd of demonstrators in town. Citizens reportedly later helped clear barricades, indicating a lack of support for the demonstrators among many residents.

14. (C) Eucher told the Ambassador the evening of August 25 that tire burnings had occurred in Les Cayes. He believed that drug traffickers were trying to stir up trouble there to make a political point just before the new Government is announced and the legislature votes it into office. He said that the HNP, reacting to persistent reports of planned violence, had rounded up a dozen suspects the previous week to preempt trouble.

ALL'S QUIET THE DAY AFTER

15. (C) Port au Prince and Les Cayes are quiet August 26. The frantic Haitian rumor mill had predicted these protests would escalate the rest of the week, but effective HNP and MINUSTAH enforcement, helped by the first rains of Hurricane Gustav, have dampened the spirits of any miscreants who may have planned to take to the streets August 26. Rumors persist of a large demonstration near Parliament on August 28.

COMMENT: BACKDROP OF NO GOVERNMENT, CONTINUING INFLATION, RISING SCHOOL FEES

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16. (C) Whoever planned these not particularly well-organized disturbances was trying to capitalize on the still-fresh memory of the April riots by organizing street violence at a politically sensitive moment. After the Parliament confirmed the new Prime Minister, Michele Pierre-Louis, on July 31, negotiations between the new Prime Minister and the political parties over the composition of her new government dragged on for weeks, and concluded with presentation of a new Government August 26 (septel). Meanwhile, the imminent beginning of the academic year has aggravated the financial burden faced by ordinary Haitians, as school fees and associated costs have risen dramatically. Prices for many basic food items have continued to rise.

17. (C) We are encouraged that HNP and UN forces learned from the April rioting and moved quickly to dismantle barricades, remove piles of rocks and tires, and re-establish order. The presentation of a new government April 26, if followed by rapid confirmation of the new ministers by the Senate and Chamber of Deputies, could buy Haiti's government more time to address the protestors, concerns about the high cost-of-living and the difficulties of the beginning of the school year.
SANDERSON